

# Character Class

## Sturdy Brawlers

### Martial Races

By Skip Williams



In a [previous installment](#) of *Characters with Class*, we identified four basic character roles: Sturdy Brawler, Stealthy Rascal, Arcane Spellslinger, and Divine Guardian. Over the next few installments, we will look more deeply into these roles. This time, we focus on the Sturdy Brawler.

Fighting characters serve as the backbone for any party. They handle everything from busting open unyielding doors to hauling loot from successful encounters. In between, they carry the fight to the enemy and form a redoubtable bulwark between the foe and the party's more vulnerable members. It's a useful and satisfying role to play.

While any martial character must be ready to fight the enemy and protect weaker allies, your sturdy brawler need not be a carbon copy of some perfect fighting machine. You can delve into the role in many ways. Start by considering the character's race.

## Races for Martial Characters

Almost any character can fight effectively, but a martial approach to adventuring comes more easily to some characters than to others. When building a fighting character, you'll tend to do better with a race that naturally excels at physical combat, but if you relish a challenge you can try something else.

### Dwarf

It's no accident that Tordek the dwarf is the example fighter shown in the *Player's Handbook*. A dwarf's Constitution bonus gives extra hit points vital to any fighting character. Dwarves also have a few racial tricks that make them particularly well suited for rough-and-tumble fighting. Their stability bonus helps them withstand trip and bull rush attacks (though this applies only when dwarves stand on the ground). They also gain helpful combat bonuses when fighting orcs, goblinoids, or giants. Dwarves can treat the highly effective dwarven waraxe and dwarven urgosh as martial weapons, which can free up a feat slot for other things (we'll deal with a fighting character's equipment in a later installment).



A dwarf has one drawback on the battlefield -- lack of mobility. Even an unencumbered dwarf has a speed of only

20 (wearing medium or heavy armor does not slow him down even further, unlike other creatures whose speed is reduced in such situations). A dwarf can overcome this limitation by marching in a group's front rank (so that the dwarf begins most encounters close to the action), using magic such as *haste* or *fly* spells or potions, *boots of speed*, or other items. A martial dwarf also would do well to coordinate maneuvers with speedier allies.

In other words, dwarves make excellent fighters. The barbarian's fast movement class feature can help dwarves overcome their speed limitations. Dwarves function fairly well as paladins, hexblades, knights, or samurai, but the dwarf's racial Charisma penalty is a detriment, especially for a paladin, knight, or hexblade. Dwarves can do well as swashbucklers, though the swashbuckler class doesn't really match most peoples' expectations about dwarves.

## Half-Orc

If a dwarf is all about withstanding damage in a fight, a half-orc is all about dealing damage. The half-orc racial Strength bonus is a boon to any fighting character. Half-orcs have few other traits that make them natural combatants, but the Strength bonus is mighty useful.

The barbarian class is a natural fit for the half-orc. Half-orcs also function well as fighters or swashbucklers. The half-orc's Charisma penalty makes the race a poor match for the paladin, hexblade, knight, or samurai class.

## Human

Human versatility makes for great characters of any fighting class. Humans have no racial ability bonuses, but they also have no ability penalties, which leaves the entire slate of martial classes open to them.



A human's bonus skill points are great for adding a little flair and depth to a martial character. A human's bonus feat can help you sharpen a character's fighting style or give the character a whole new capability.

Exactly how to spend a human's resources depends on the martial class you select. For example, a human fighter might spend his extra skill points on perception skills such as Spot or Listen (albeit cross class), just to help avoid

unpleasant surprises. A human fighter might use his human bonus feat for Alertness (sharpening his sense even further) or perhaps for Improved Unarmed Strike -- such a character would never be without a weapon.

## Elf

Fighting elves have a certain cachet, but building and playing a martial elf character takes some care. An elf's racial Dexterity bonus is helpful for defense and for getting the drop on foes. On the other hand, an elf's racial Constitution penalty makes for a fragile character.

Elven racial familiarity with swords and bows makes them effective on the battlefield no matter what classes they choose, but this bonus isn't all it might be when one considers that most martial classes also grant proficiency with these weapons. An elf's racial bonus on Spot and Listen checks, however, is useful to a fighting character. An elf is slightly less prone to being caught unawares than are other characters.



An elf's weak Constitution score makes the barbarian less than an ideal choice. Elves can function quite well as fighters, swashbucklers, paladins, hexblades, knights, or samurai. The paladin's and hexblade's spells nicely offset an elf's lack of Constitution. The swashbuckler's fluid and mobile fighting style suits an elf well.

## Half-Elf

Like humans, half-elves have neither a racial ability bonus nor an ability penalty, which leaves them well positioned to enter any martial class. Half-elves lack a human's bonus skill points and bonus feat, but they have many advantages in common with elves, such as a bonus on Spot and Listen checks. A half-elf's bonus on Diplomacy and Gather Information checks can prove helpful for paladins, knights, and swashbucklers.

## Halfling

Halflings are known for being resourceful survivors, but they're hardly physically intimidating. As with elves, halflings are dexterous and quick to react. On the other hand, the halfling racial Strength penalty is a real detriment for a fighting character, because it reduces both the chance for successful melee attacks and the damage that they deal in melee. A halfling's small size further limits the damage a halfling character can deal,

because size Small characters must wield smaller, less damaging weapons. A halfling's short stature gives the character a fairly slow base speed of 20 feet.

All is not against a fighting halfling, however. A halfling's Small size improves the character's Armor Class. Small characters receive an attack bonus that helps offset the character's Strength penalty. Halflings gain extra attack bonuses with thrown weapons and slings. A halfling with a martial class usually has proficiency with ranged weaponry that's more effective than a sling or anything the character can throw, but it's nice to have an extra edge when you need to throw something quickly to finish off or distract a foe. Finally, halflings gain many skill and saving throw bonuses that make them both versatile and tenacious combatants. Halflings can do especially well if they choose the Weapon Finesse feat and use light weaponry or rapiers for melee combat.

The fighter class, with its host of bonus fighting feats, offers an excellent way to get the most from a fighting halfling. They also can do well as hexblades, swashbucklers, or dragon shamans.

## Gnome

Gnomes share many of the halfling's disadvantages when building fighting characters. They have racial Strength penalties, are size Small, and their base speed is only 20 feet.

Gnomes have a few traits that can offset their disadvantages, however. Like dwarves, gnomes have a racial Constitution bonus, which makes for tough characters. Gnomes gain combat bonuses against kobolds, goblinoids and giants. Like halflings, a gnome's Small size confers some advantages in combat, and a gnome also enjoys bonuses to saving throws against illusions and to Listen skill checks -- both useful for avoiding ambushes and other deceptions. A gnome can treat a gnome hooked hammer as a martial weapon. Finally, a gnome with a Charisma score of at least 10 gains a small repertoire of spell-like abilities that can prove useful for keeping foes off balance when a fight begins.

The swashbuckler class offers a good match for a gnome's racial traits and penchant for harassing and confounding foes. Gnomes also can do well as hexblades, fighters, or dragon shamans.

## Other Races





Thus far, we've limited our discussion to races from the *Player's Handbook*. Other books provide many other races for player characters. Here are a few guidelines for building fighting characters of other races.

Bonuses to Strength, Constitution, and Dexterity ability scores are a boon to fighting characters. On the other hand, races that have penalties to those scores can become effective combatants, but only with more careful handling. See the notes already presented in this article for ideas.

Consider how a race's skill bonuses and special abilities can help during (or immediately before) a battle.

As we have seen, fighting characters often can make good use of perception skills (such as Spot and Listen), interaction skills (such as Bluff, Diplomacy, Gather Information, or Sense Motive). Remember that combat frequently involves special actions such as bull rushing or tripping, or other special tricks and maneuvers that you might use from time to time. Dig into the racial description and look for fresh ways to make your character effective in battle.

Sometimes a race's martial advantages will prove fairly obvious. For example, a centaur from the *Monster Manual* has huge Strength and Constitution bonuses, two natural weapons, and fast speed. A centaur is clearly a fighting machine (and it has a level adjustment to match).

Some races have less obvious combat advantages. For example, an air genasi (from the *Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting*) has racial bonuses to Dexterity and Intelligence and penalties to Wisdom and Charisma. Air genasi are quick on their feet and very smart but somewhat heedless of their surroundings and perhaps a tad rude. An air genasi also doesn't need to breathe and can levitate. This combination of traits could be the basis for an excellent fighter, swashbuckler, or barbarian. An air genasi, however, doesn't do so well as a paladin, knight, or hexblade.

Next up, we look at weapons.

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## About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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